A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Author's Note: Remember how I said I'd get this to you next week? Yeah, that was code word for 5 months. Sorry, but I hope no one is surprised at this point.

Chapter 13

Gunfire, thought Grievous, looking up at the ceiling of the old sewer. Someone was fighting up there. Twenty meters behind him, he'd seen a ladder. Either it was the enemy fighting possible allies, or possible allies fighting the enemy. "Back this way," he ordered to the girl.

"What? Why?" she asked, flattening herself against the wall as Grievous whirled around.

"We're not alone."

"Huh?"

There wasn't time to explain. Grievous shot up the ladder, coughing as he went, and punched the manhole cover straight up into the air. He jumped out of hole and landed in the snow above. An extremely surprised uniformed human with a blaster, crouched behind a corner, stared at him with wide eyes.

"Holy sh-" the human began to say, before a blaster bolt sizzled into Grievous's chest plate, throwing him into a fit of coughing.

"Don't tell me you're dead already," came the voice of the girl, her heard poking out above the snow.

"Not yet," Grievous growled, scuttling behind the building's corner as well. "What's the situation?" he asked to the human.

"Uh, um, uh," the human cringed as a wave of fire blasted chunks of masonry off the wall centimeters away from them. "I'm just a policeman, General, I have no idea what's going on here. These Koorivars showed up and told us to hand over our weapons, we refused, they stormed the precinct."

"Our corporate allies have decided it's time to stop being our allies," said Grievous. "They attempted to capture me. They failed."

The Jedi girl had joined them at some point. "Well-" she started, but Grievous gave her the most scalding glare he could summon.

"We need to get to the communications array," Grievous said. "They've shut down the local droid forces."

"Easier said than done, we already tried to get there," the policeman said. "They've got it on lock-down."

"How many of them are there?" asked the girl.

"At least a few hundred Gossams, we've seen Koorivar and Nemoidians too."

"And you?"

"Just a dozen of us from our station. We've been on comms with some other groups, so we're not alone. Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm... a secret agent," said the girl. Grievous tried not to laugh.

"Her identity is of no concern to you. You would be wise to forget you ever saw her," he told the policeman.

"I'm not dumb enough to question you, General," the policeman said. "What can we do to help you?"

"There are many places in this city a hostile army needs to secure in order to control it. The array is just one of them." Grievous's ears pricked forwards, he could hear the gunship's engines in the distance. "The spaceport is another. The military spaceport."

"The one near Alifan District?" asked the policeman.

"Yes." Grievous nodded, though he had no idea if Alifan District was the suburb the spaceport was near. "We need air support."

"Hell yeah, we do."

Where the other police were, Grievous wasn't entirely sure, but they were close. He could hear blaster fire nearby, and sometimes catch movement through windows of the surrounding buildings. The Koorivars were out of sight too, firing from well inside a building only thirty meters up the street. *Just like we did when the Huk came,* Grievous thought. Their enemies weren't idiots, that was for sure.

"Their gunship is inbound. We need to get back into cover," he said.

"The ancient sewer?" asked the policeman. "We thought about using that, couldn't find a way in with all this snow on the ground. Good thing you just came out of there."

"Get down there, I'll deal with the Koorivar. We're going to this Alifan." Grievous turned on the girl's lightsaber, and stood up.

Thirty meters to the enemy, the only obvious way forward would get him killed immediately. *I will make my own path,* Grievous thought. He'd done that before. They'd taken an earthmover and plowed their way through one of their own villages to avoid a killing zone set up by the Huk. But, it had worked. He smashed down the nearest door, and bounded through the house, ignoring the stupefied look of the family huddling within. With a single swing of his blade – well, the girl's blade – he shattered a window and jumped out into the alleyway. *Eight meters down, twenty-two to go.*

Through four more buildings, Grievous repeated this. Smash open a door, run through the halls, smash through the first way out he saw. After what felt like ten minutes, he came to the final building, but his internal clock told him it'd only been but a single minute. Grievous dashed through the alley, and then darted out onto the street; his target was only meters away.

Being so far inside the building, the Koorivar had no idea what was coming up on their flank. Grievous sliced through a side door and bounded down the corridors of whatever he was inside of. He bowled through another door, flattening one of the soldiers where he stood, and impaling another before he could even turn around.

"What-?" one of them asked, whipping about and raising his blaster. A second later, and a green blade had decapitated him.

"Grievous!?" another shouted. "Spread out, spread out!"

Good move, but you're already dead, Grievous thought, leaping at the nearest Koorivar. If they got far enough away, they might be able to catch him in a cross fire, and this whole ridiculous catastrophe would come to an end. One went down, and then another, and then there was a red flash that zipped by Grievous's eyes. He took a step forward and fell flat on his face.

Warnings flashed across his vision – his left knee had been damaged and could no longer support his full weight. Grievous roared in wordless fury, and flung himself at the nearest Koorivar, snapping his neck like a twig. He whirled the lightsaber around like a saw with one hand and smashed another soldier's face in with his other. And then there were none left standing. Grievous himself was kneeling on the floor, trying to cough up his lungs but for a lack of throat.

"*Thanks for the support, General!*" came the policeman's voice on the comms. "*Everyone's in the sewer now, we're ready to move out.*"

"Good," Grievous wheezed, stumbling out of the room. Every lurch rattled his lungs and made him cough more. Diagnostic readouts were floating before his eyes, reporting every problem in his body. *Have these always been here?* he wondered. Not only was his left knee damaged, some of his arm components had taken hits too, and there was a whole array of scorch marks left on his armor plates. Like some timid jungle lurker, Grievous darted from shadow to shadow through the snowy streets, listening for the approach of the gunship.

"What happened to you?" the Jedi girl asked, once he was back in the safety of the sewer.

"The news was right, you really do lead from the front," remarked the policeman. He'd been joined by his comrades, both humans and non-human alike.

"If I want something done right, I have to do it myself," said Grievous, slowing his breathing so that he didn't cough. "We have no time for talk, so get moving."

No one dared question him. Neither did they dare to remark on the grinding sound coming from his knee as he limped forward.

The past day had been like some surreal nightmare that Kronaak could not wake up from. To have fallen from such heights as the raid on Coruscant and execution of the dictator Palpatine, to lurking on the edge of civilization, hoping against hope that their leader would somehow weasel out of yet another impossible situation... *Infuriating,* Kronaak thought, stabbing his walking stick into the floor of his bridge.

"There must be something we can do!" he growled. "Anything!"

"I'm afraid not, sir," OOM-27 said. "We are too far away."

"I will kill anyone who surrenders with my own claws," Kronaak fumed, snapping at thin air. And indeed, there were a few who had surrendered, across the galaxy. Not many, but a few. The gullible, the foolish, the weak, the tired, the despairing. The Confederacy had no use for such defeatists and idiots anyway, it was a good riddance. *But I'll still kill them.*

Grievous had to make his escape. He probably already had. Yes, yes, that was for sure. Grievous was too cunning to let a bunch of corporate goons take him down. He'd survived three years of leading from so far in the front that he was his own vanguard. He could survive this. He *would* survive this. Without Grievous, the Confederacy was doomed. Kronaak knew that, as much as he hated it. There was no one else alive who had the prestige, the respect, and the fear that Grievous wielded over the state and its citizens. In fact, Kronaak couldn't think of a single realistic alternative to Grievous. The politicians hadn't even known Admiral Hithlu existed until earlier this afternoon. The military probably didn't know a single senator in their own congress. Kronaak couldn't name any. No, there was no alternative to Grievous. If he went down, the Confederacy went down.

But that's not going to happen, Kronaak thought. *We've come too far to lose to such trickery now!* And yet, what if it did? What if their leader fell to that very trickery? What if the Confederacy splintered into a thousand different factions, each claiming to be the legitimate government? Who would continue the war? Who would give up? Who would fight their own comrades in a bid for hegemony over a pathetic remnant of the Separatist state? The very idea chilled him to the chitin. No, that wasn't happening. The Republic had paid for what it had done, and it would continue to pay. The corrupt would be vanquished, the tyrants cast down, the chains of oppression thrown off, the slavers and their enablers annihilated. *Death to the Republic, death to the Senate, curse on the Jedi, victory to the Confederacy,* as one famous Jabiimi shadowfeed channel was fond of ending every newscast with.

Admiral Hithlu was taking everything far better than Kronaak. "We've done what we can," he'd told them. "Now we must make sure the war continues as if nothing is happening." *We* meant Hithlu, in that case. Neither Kroonak, Khwaramenes, Eemon, or any of the other flag officers had been asked to help there. Hithlu had just assumed command of... everything, with no real resistance.

That's what Eemon meant, thought Kronaak. *He's setting himself up as a leader in case Grievous is dead, and as a loyal and competent commander if Grievous survives. And the rest of us are along for the ride.* And Kronaak didn't have the will to challenge him, because Hithlu was clearly a natural leader. He'd spent nearly twelve hours in contact with elements of the Fifth Fleet in the Serenno theater, which had been shattered at Celanon just a few days ago. It explained why Admiral Piast hadn't been at the last strategy meeting, he was dead. Admiral Hithlu had cooked up some scheme with an officer named Helnurath, but Kronaak wasn't informed of any details.

In the meantime, with broadcasting services down, the only word of events on Raxus was leaking out as first hand reports from locals with shadowfeed connections. There were more than a few distrustful citizens on the planet who kept their own private uplinks. Even with the central array down, so they said, they were able to communicate with the rest of the galaxy. Kronaak had a shadowfeed open now on the command bridge. A university student in Raxulon was giving by-the-minute reports on some discussion forum called *m11talk·rax*. Kronaak had grown up without holonet access and didn't understand anything that happened there beyond streamed broadcasts, but news was news. So far, there was a rumor going around that Grievous indeed had been captured, but promptly escaped and was fighting a running battle in the city streets. Someone was even claiming they'd seen him in their neighborhood.

Still, Kronaak wished he could do something. "Then find something to do," Eemon told him through hologram connection. He was reclining in a chair that wasn't rendered, writing away on a datapad with a stylus. Not many people from civilized worlds hand-wrote things. *Carammites are stranger than most humans,* Kronaak thought.

"This wouldn't be an issue if we could simply cut through Hutt space," Kronaak said. He brought up a map of the front lines. That green blob sitting between southern and eastern portions of the Confederacy was an eyesore. "The Republic uses it to resupply their holdings in the Mon Calamari sector. By all rights, this makes their supposed neutrality a dead letter. And yet, we are held back, time and again..."

"What are you going to do, launch a one-man invasion of Hutt space?" asked Eemon.

"Perhaps I will," said Kronaak. "If Grievous dies, the war cannot be won. Then I will have nothing left to lose, and will seek my revenge upon the Hutts."

"What did the Hutts do to you?"

"Allow slavery."

"Well, fair enough. If Grievous dies, the Republic will probably have my entire family killed," said Eemon. "I can't blame them, my father is a horrible man. Fair, but horrible. You can't rule a planet without getting some blood on your hands-" Eemon suddenly sat up. "You know, I just realized, this coup would have never happened if the Confederacy had a functioning internal security agency. We've got one on Caramm, they shut down any dissent as soon as it begins. We call them the *baithyan,* which... Well, it's Carammite, not easily translated. In any case, I have an idea... Hold on."

"Do you?" asked Kronaak.

"I'm going to call an old... acquaintance. We could use his help when this is all over." With that, Eemon was gone.

Kronaak turned back to his map of the galaxy. He zoomed in on Hutt space. *Dissent, he says?* Well, Kronaak too had an idea now.

"Somewhere around here, we should find a link to the undertram," said Esera. "I don't know what an undertram is, but I'd guess it's a tram that goes underground."

"A brilliant analysis," Grievous snapped.

"I thought I should tell you before you started beheading these men for 'wandering around,' or whatever excuse you'd come up with." Esera crossed her arms and frowned at the discontent cyborg. If he had a mouth, he'd be frowning right back, Esera knew.

"You know me too well," said Grievous. Not even his vocoder could keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

She wasn't going to respond to that. Down in these tunnels, sound could carry a long way, she didn't need their new friends getting doubts about the unity of their leadership. *And I am a leader here,* Esera thought. *How did this happen?* And how many times was she going to ask herself that question today? If anyone here found out she was a Jedi, she'd be in trouble, that was for sure. Formerly a Jedi. It was only yesterday Aspar had told her the news. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours yet. Esera yawned, feeling suddenly more drained than she had since the worst of the fighting on Shumavar.

"Don't tell me *you're* tired," Grievous said, deliberately making his damaged knee grind louder than usual.

"I'm in a sewer with General Grievous," Esera grumbled. "I've hit rock bottom. I have a right to be tired."

"I've been in worse places," said Grievous, with an almost wistful tone. "Wading through neck-high standing water in a mangrove swamp, guns above our heads and swords in our teeth... Leeches on our legs and flies in our noses, but the huk never saw us coming." The cyborg laughed, deep and rumbling, but entirely genuine. "We took so many heads we couldn't put all of them on our battle standards."

"You sure sound proud of that," said Esera.

"Of course I am," Grievous said, "They came to our world to put us in chains, but we put them in graves." He paused, before laughing again. "No, actually, we left them them to rot!"

One of these days, she'd get the story about these *huk*, whatever they were. It wasn't any species she was familiar with, but then again, Esera's education had been cut short by the war. The end of the war would bring trigonometry anew, and Esera had her doubts about that.

"There's a door here!" one of the policemen announced. "It's locked-"

Grievous brushed him aside, and stabbed the lock with Esera's lightsaber. He kicked down the door, making such a ruckus the corporate goons looking for them above probably heard it. "Now it's not," Grievous growled between coughs. "Go!"

The unlikely band found themselves in a much larger tunnel, a circular bore cut through the depths, with three rails on the floor. It curved gently in one direction, and Esera could feel a constant breeze tugging at her hair.

"There's legends that you'll die if you touch the middle rail," said another of the policemen. "They say it once carried the power supply of the undertram, before repulsorlifts came to Raxus. Back when that sewer we were just in was actually used as a sewer. Billions of volts of electricity still flow through it... So they say."

"How primitive," Esera said.

"Where I come from," Grievous muttered, "trains use wood for fuel."

Everyone looked at him in confusion. How any vehicle could be fueled by *wood* was simply absurd. Such a machine must have been inefficient beyond all belief. *He's remembering a lot about his former life,* Esera thought. *But only when he's reminded...*

They walked along a service path cut into the side of the wall, just in case the undertram was still running. They didn't see a single sign of life beyond some rodents scurrying on the edge of their lights, though. Not until they came to a station fill with trapped commuters.

"It's General Grievous!" someone gasped.

"With the police!"

"What are they doing here?"

"What's going on up there?"

"Why is there gunfire in the city?"

"Why aren't the trains running?"

"Silence!" boomed Grievous, raising a hand. "I have been betrayed by scheming cowards, who in their idiocy have failed to apprehend me! I-" he was interrupted by a fit of coughing, "I am leading my loyal soldiers to deal with these traitors, and am commandeering this train. Step aside, unless you wish to join those traitors in their inevitable fates."

No one took the cyborg up on his offer.

"General," one of the transit officers began, "whoever's in charge up there has locked us out of the system. There's no way we can..." She trailed off, wilting under the stare of Grievous.

"We will make our own way," he said, turning to Esera. He leaned down, almost doubling over, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Time for you to do something, girl."

"But I don't know anything about trains!" Esera whispered back.

"I refuse to believe that!" Grievous snapped. "How many times have my plans been ruined by one of *you* because you pulled some ridiculously contrived solution out of-!?" He stopped, clenching a mechanical fist, glaring at the crowd who were doing their best to listen in. "Make the train run, *Jedi*," he said, so quietly she almost wondered if he'd really said anything at all.

"Fine," Esera sighed. And that's how she spent the better part of an hour on her back under a control panel, playing with wires she could only guess the purpose of. *The Force will guide me,* she kept telling herself. And through the constant churning turmoil that was now ever-present, she let it show her the way. Esera didn't even realize she'd gotten it until the train began to move.

"All aboard!" one of the policeman called.

Grievous strode in pace with the train, awkwardly hobbled strides at that, making sure everyone in their group was aboard before stepping on himself. Esera sat in the conductor's seat in the cabin, trying to figure out what lever was for the brakes.

"Do you know how to drive this thing?" she was asked.

"Maybe," Esera said, feeling sweat on her brow. Who knew a train needed so many buttons...

The machine lurched ever forward, slowly gaining speed. She decided not to do anything until she needed to, and in the mean time, find a driver's manual. Grievous had busied himself with a map of the undertram system painted onto a wall. "This will take us straight to the fort?" he asked to no one in particular.

"It should," Esera said. "I'd ask my droid to make sure, but there's no reception down here."

"What is it with you people and droids?" Grievous grumbled. "You all seem to have one that follows you around."

"No... I never really had a droid outside of flying, until recently."

"That Ashoka Tano brat always had one," said Grievous. "That blue trashcan thing."

"You know Ashoka Tano?" asked Esera in surprise. "Like, did you fight her?"

"A few times," Grievous said. "What's she to you?"

"We were in the same classes when we were training at the Temple. I didn't really know her... Kind of a hothead. Really good at sparring, I could never beat her." Esera frowned, remembering the times Tano had totally destroyed her in the ring. Those weren't particularly good memories, but they had been learning experiences. That was what she told herself. Esera would have been an even worse duelist without all those rounds of practice. "She was really bad at solving problems *without* violence, though, I'll say that."

"There's nothing that can't be solved with violence," said Grievous, shaking his head. "Sentimental fools, all of you."

"Who's the more foolish? The fool or the fool that follows him?" Esera mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing, it's something Master Kenobi said once."

"Ah, Kenobi... The negotiator." Grievous growled, and coughed. "I hate that man, I really do."

"What happened to him, anyway?" asked Esera. "I know Anakin Skywalker is dead, and so is the Chancellor, but Master Kenobi went up there for the rescue mission too..."

"Kenobi is alive and well aboard my ship, you'll be pleased to hear." The cyborg rolled his eyes. "I have no idea what to do with him. I can't kill him unless I beat him in single combat, but he's too valuable to just forget about."

"Maybe you should let him go," said Esera.

The stare she got was not an amused one. "I'd prefer a ransom," Grievous said.

An awkward silence fell in the tram's cabin. Esera sat in the conductor's seat and pretended she was being useful, Grievous loomed over her shoulder, huge and hunched over like some nightmareish creature, no doubt thinking nightmareish creature thoughts. But the only hostility she could sense in him was towards those who had betrayed him. There were many in the galaxy who were hard to read, even for better Jedi than Esera. Grievous didn't seem to be one of them. As this insane day went on, she was having an easier time of sensing his intentions and feelings. She'd never had an easier time reading someone, come to think of it. Esera wasn't sure she liked that. But if there was one person in the galaxy it would be useful to sense the intentions of, it was a notorious Jedi killer.

After an eternity of quiet, Grievous stirred. "We're coming up on the spaceport," he said. Moments later, the tram's computer announced as much. "Stop the train," ordered he.

"Stopping the train," Esera muttered, pulling what she hoped was the brake lever. She and everyone else aboard lurched forward as the machine ground to a halt, just as it arrived at the station.

"Move out!" Grievous shouted to the policemen, throwing his cloak over the back of the conductor's chair and Esera too. Off he went with *her* lightsaber.

Here we go again, Esera thought, as a bad feeling settled in her stomach.

"This is the moment we've been waiting for!" Organa said, putting his fist in his palm. "We can end this war, today! All you have to do is accept their surrender!"

"Yes, we can end this war today," Tarkin agreed, stepping forward. "Send all our available ships to Raxus right this instant, and kill them all! Grievous, Shu Mai, their congress, wipe them all out and the Separatists will fall apart!"

Mas Amedda, as usual, did nothing but put his hand on his chin, staring down at the desk in front of him. This was no leader; he knew it, and so did everyone else. But the law had to be observed. Mas Amedda would be acting Chancellor until elections in six months. Until then, it was a free for all to influence him.

"What good would that do?" Bail Organa asked, giving Tarkin an incredulous look. "If you destroy the Separatist leadership, then we'll have to negotiate a thousand ceasefires in a thousand different places!"

"We are the legitimate government," said Tarkin. "We don't need to *negotiate* with terrorists and rebels. They forfeited all their rights by taking up arms against the Republic and Senate."

"With an attitude like that, this war will never end," Organa sighed.

It will *end, and on our terms,* Tarkin thought. "Chancellor Amedda," he began, with the coldest smile he could gather. "The Commerce Guild, Trade Federation and all the others betrayed the Republic once to fund this Separatist rebellion. Now they've betrayed their so-called Confederacy in the attempt to be in our good graces once again. Do you *really* think this is behavior we should tacitly endorse? Which, I must remind you, we would be, by accepting their surrender."

"Senator Tarkin is right for once," said Tarkin's least favorite person in the room besides Bail Organa: Mace Windu. The meddlesome Jedi had insisted on being a part of this decision-making process. "The corporate forces have committed treason twice now, we can't trust them. We should send a Jedi strike team to Raxus immediately and capture both Grievous, his congress, and their financial backers."

"A Jedi strike team-!?" huffed Tarkin, before turning away and raising a dismissive hand. "Don't make me laugh, Master Windu. The last time the Jedi tried something like this, they botched the whole operation and had to be rescued by the clone army," he sighed. He returned his attention to Amedda. "If you're going to send anyone, Chancellor, send a clone legion with competent, classically-trained military leadership. Not these hermits waving lightswords and casting spells playing at war!"

"We have *played* at war for three years now, Senator," Windu said. "We know what we're doing."

"Do you?" asked Tarkin. "Master Yoda deployed his entire army to the beachhead on Kashyyyk, out in the open in *front* of a perfectly defensible city and its dense forest hinterland. The casualties have been immense, far greater than they would have been with a *real* general in command."

"I hardly think it's the Senate's business questioning how we conduct the war effort," said Windu, frowning in Tarkin's direction.

"Peace, peace, gentlemen," sighed the Chancellor, raising a hand and closing his eyes. Mas Amedda was exhausted, that much was obvious. "It is too early to make a decision. I will wait and see how this unfolds."

The three other men all groaned. Organa, Windu, and Tarkin could all agree that *something* had to be done. *The election can't come soon enough,* Tarkin thought.

"Now, if you excuse me," Amedda went on, "I have another appointment-"

An incoming communication alert began to beep on the Chancellor's desk. An *urgent* incoming communication. Tarkin and Organa exchanged a glance, and Windu leaned forward in his seat.

Amedda sighed, and answered it. "What-"

"Chancellor!" came a desperate voice Tarkin recognized. *Reynaud Renau?* He hadn't seen that man since their days in the academy. Renau was flustered, nearly panicked. "An entire Separatist fleet just blasted past our pickets at Botajef!"

"What?" Windu asked, standing up and entering into the projector's range.

"A few hours ago, our scouts reported the Separatists pulling their fleets out of the orbits of Junction, Toprawa, Axxila, *and* Serenno, " Renau said, pointing at a map he brought into the hologram. "We didn't know what they were doing until they dropped out of hyperspace at Botajef to avoid the minefield we laid. They blew right past us and continued coreward."

"Serenno?" Tarkin gave a start at that. "That fleet hasn't moved in over a year! It's the second largest static force they have, after the one at Raxus."

"They're barreling down the Hydian Way right now," reported Renau, wiping sweat from his brow. "I believe they might try to hit Anaxes or Kuat, maybe even Coruscant again."

Mas Amedda sank into his chair, and put a hand on his forehead. "Governor, mobilize your forces," he said. "We must protect the Core."

"My lord," said Renau, "that would mean abandoning this entire theater of operations..."

"We should let the Home Fleet deal with this," Tarkin advised. "Governor Renau should attack Serenno while it's undefended. We'd deal a crushing blow to their morale."

"No," Amedda said, "we can't leave Coruscant open to another attack, the Senate would never forgive us. The 11th Fleet will return to the Core to deal with these invaders."

Tarkin could only sigh.

"Viceroy, there is a disturbance at Alifan Spaceport," a droid reported. Tuuk and Gunray both turned around, and looked at the hologram map of Raxulon. Far on the outskirts, there was a red flashing icon.

"What kind of disturbance?" asked Gunray.

"Our units are reporting an attack on the spaceport."

"So much for the perfect plan," Tuuk muttered, just barely shying away from a smug smirk.

"Get me Shu Mai," Gunray demanded.

"*Gunray!*" Shu Mai barked the moment she was up on the vision screen. "*Why are your troops under attack?*"

"I was expecting you to tell me. I thought *your* troops had secured the city!" he snapped back.

"*We have had a breach of containment,*" said Shu Mai, after a moment's hesitation.

"A breach of containment?" Gunray repeated, his eyes sliding over to Tuuk. The admiral put a hand on his chin, but said nothing. "It's Grievous, isn't it?" he asked. The Gossam was silent, and that was all the confirmation he needed. "We must send all available units to that spaceport before he can get off-world!"

"*I have already ordered it so,*" Shu Mai growled. "*But if he thinks we'll be distracted this easily, we have a surprise for him...*"

Contact was terminated, and not a moment after, Tuuk spoke. "So that's the way the wind is blowing," he said.

"There is a saying on Corellia:" Gunray said. "*The cat is out of the bag.*"

"What does that mean?" Tuuk asked.

"It means that Grievous won't be put away again," said Gunray. "The time to make our choice has come."

"*Our?*" Tuuk narrowed his eyes. "I'm only in on this because of that favor I owed you. This is all on you, Viceroy. But... do you really believe the Republic is going to accept the treason of traitors?"

Absolutely not, Gunray decided. "Grievous is strong and stubborn, I'm not surprised he managed to escape," he said, looking at the map of the city. "But subtlety has never been his strong point. I think he's trying to draw us away from something."

"The communications array," Tuuk agreed, nodding. "It's not that far from the spaceport. He could use it to override the droid shut down signal on Raxus."

"Yes, exactly," said Gunray. "Until Grievous gets to the spaceport, we will figure out what Shu Mai's surprise is. Perhaps we will prepare a surprise of our own."

"Triple treason," Tuuk chuckled. "This is much more interesting than Kashyyyk."

In the three long years of this war, Grievous had rarely encountered a brave Nemoidian. Today was an exception. A massive one.

"Fall back, I'll cover you!" shouted the Nemoidian officer, popping out from behind a corner and dumping his rifle's entire magazine in Grievous's direction. Two others dragged a wounded comrade out of the line of fire and down a side hall. The *crack-crack-crack* of a slugthrower brought vivid sensations to his mind: the smell of gunpowder, the taste of blood, the roar of a combustion engine, the shriek of rocket motors, a bittersweet farewell, fire and victory-

The bullets ricocheted off his chest plate, one nicked his mask and grazed the flesh around his eye. Grievous was forced back around his own corner, taking blind shots with the blaster rifle he'd confiscated from someone.

"They're insane!" one of the Raxulon police officers gasped, one hand over his ear. "Slugthrowers? In the current year?"

"Do not underestimate them," Grievous growled. "They are better marksmen than you'll ever be." He put a hand over where his heart was, feeling the chipped metal plate. If he'd been in his original body, he'd be dead right now.

"I hate slugthrowers," the Jedi girl said from somewhere behind him. If a Jedi didn't like slugthrowers, that'd explain why these Nemoidians were using them.

His ears picked up the retreating sound of boots on duracrete; the Nemoidians had fallen back successfully. Grievous closed his eyes, and imagined the layout of the spaceport in his head. Or maybe the computers in his brain actually projected such an image. The entire rag-tag team had taken over the undertram station, and now were fighting their way to the pilot's barracks through subterranean passages. Clearly, the Nemoidians hadn't been expecting an attack, but weren't slow to react. He had no idea how many there were, but it was just him, the girl, and three dozen of the city police force against them.

"You five," Grievous pointed to some of the police, "get to the air traffic control tower. Alert me to any inbound reinforcements. And you five, secure one of the hangars." Both groups did as told, leaving Grievous with roughly two dozen. Most of the Nemoidians seemed to be clustered around the pilot barracks. If they did this right, they'd free the pilots and then they'd finally have some air support...

The Nemoidians were gone, his ears couldn't pick up anything now, except the background hum of electrical lines and assorted pipes. One of them had dropped their slugthrower while retreating; it probably belonged to the wounded one. Grievous took it, and shoved the blaster to one of his squad.

"You know how to use those things?" asked the girl.

"Of course," said Grievous. "I grew up shooting guns like this."

"Do I even want to know why?" she groaned.

"They came to enslave us," Grievous said, in a low growl. "Their greatest mistake."

"I'll bet..."

A flash of movement flickered at the end of the hall. Grievous raised the rifle, and sent three bullets down range. His brain may have forgotten much of his past life, but his muscles – or at least their replacements linked to his nervous system – had not. Something slumped down at the far end.

"Nice shot, General," one of the police said.

Grievous didn't stop, he rushed forward as fast as his damaged leg could take him, knee grinding all the way. The Jedi girl even winced at the sound. "Do you sense anything?" he asked her as quietly as he could.

"They're close," she said. "I think."

"Grenade," Grievous ordered, stretching out an arm behind him. He felt a weight on his palm, and immediately pulled armed the detonator and tossed it through the door way. If the explosion didn't kill them, it'd at least scatter them! The lightsaber flashed on, and Grievous bounded through the doorway. He unloaded the magazine on the first shadows his enhanced vision caught through the smoke, and half-consciously sliced away wildly with the saber.

"Save some for the rest of us," one of the policemen commented.

They were at the bottom of a stairwell. Above, the cold winter sunlight shined through. There was a commotion up there; someone was raising the alarm. *No time to lose!* Grievous thought. "With me!" he shouted, leading the way up.

Quite literally, Grievous shot out of the stairway and into a snowy courtyard. The Nemoidians were in the process of setting up a heavy repeater, but they were seconds too slow. The cyborg fell on them like a whirlwind, a blaze of green light and metallic fury. His gun was empty, and he threw it at one of the Nemoidians, catching him square in the face.

Then the rest of his impromptu army was out of the tunnel, blasting away at the other soldiers. The Jedi girl was among them, but not shooting. Grievous took a moment to roll his eyes, as his talons caught a Nemoidian crawling for his gun and snapped his neck. *These are the bravest Nemoidians I've ever seen,* Grievous thought. It was almost a waste to kill them. The Confederacy needed soldiers like these.

Something smashed into him, and Grievous was sent sprawling and coughing. He scrambled back onto his feet, only to be hit again in the arm. One of the Nemoidians was hitting *him!* With his *gun!* The madman was swinging his empty rifle like a club! Grievous raised the saber- "What?" he hissed, looking at his empty hand. He'd been disarmed!

The Nemoidian screamed like death itself and charged again, fear in his eyes but an even more ferocious determination overcoming it. Grievous caught his gun in one hand, and punched him in the face with another. The insane Nemoidian went down. *That was a true warrior,* Grievous thought, with a respect that wasn't even begrudging.

Grievous glanced around, trying to find a weapon he could use. He heard the blade snap on, and turned, expecting to see the Jedi girl taking her lightsaber back. Instead, he found another Nemoidian staring him down. While Grievous had been dealing with the crazy one, this soldier had gone for the lightsaber. *Smart and deceptive... just what I'd expect from their kind.* The self-sacrifice of the madman was suddenly more rational.

This Nemoidian was bigger than the others, and he was not afraid. The big Nemoidian swung the saber in his hand once, and took up a ready stance; clearly a practiced swordsman. Grievous sank back onto his talons, ready to jump in any direction he needed.

The soldier rushed at him, blade held close but pointed straight at Grievous. The cyborg hurled himself away, almost cartwheeling into a wall as a fit of coughing tore at his lungs. His foe pivoted as he slid on the snow, and took another lightning-fast stab at Grievous. The blade bored into his shoulder plate, but did not hit anything vital. Grievous was quick, very quick, but unarmed against a trained and disciplined swordsman like this, he was as good as dead. The crippling coughs from his damaged lungs would only make that death come faster. Again, the Nemoidian rushed forward, controlled and calm, keeping his body out of the cyborg's reach. The lightsaber reached out, half-slicing through Grievous's left arm. Only one half of his left hand was now responding.

Was this how he died? To some no-name Nemoidian in some barracks courtyard, without a single weapon? *This is as good a place to die as any,* Grievous thought, barely escaping a killing blow from the Nemoidian. Better to die standing than a prisoner. *Victory or-!*

And then a single shot rang out.

The Nemoidian fell over, a smoke scorch mark in the side of his head. The Jedi girl lowered her blaster, tight-lipped and hard-eyed. No more Nemoidians were left standing; half of his police force was dead.

"Good work," he commended. "Their sacrifice will not be in vain. Secure the building, release the pilots and get them to their ships. Our path to the array is now open."

Grievous surveyed the courtyard, nodding to himself. The policemen had done their jobs well, for mere law enforcers. A fifty-percent casualty rate wasn't bad at all against trained soldiers. To his immense surprise, the insane Nemoidian who had attacked him with his rifle was still breathing. Unconscious, but breathing. In fact, a few of the Nemoidians were still breathing. So were some of the Raxulon police. That was one nice thing about droids: they were either dead or not, none of this in-between business.

His eyes then fell on the Jedi girl, who was sitting dejectedly on a piece of rubble, blaster at her feet.

"I suppose I should thank you," said Grievous, between coughs. "I wouldn't have lasted much longer."

"Don't bother," the girl answered.

"What's the matter?" Grievous asked, wishing he could still smirk. "Is killing a real person too much for your Jedi ethics?"

He got no angry glare out of her, no sorrowful tears. The girl just stared at the blaster, like she didn't know what it was. "When I was fourteen, I could feel it in the Force," she said in a quiet voice. "Every death. It was like my heart was breaking, over and over. Now, though... nothing. I felt nothing."

Grievous's mirth faded away. *She's a fool,* he told himself. *A sentimental cowardly fool, a Jedi knight, just like the ones who ruined my homeworld! Of course she feels nothing, she was a mindless pawn of the Republic!* But... There was a part of him, old and forgotten, stirring deep within. He knew that he was lying to himself. It must have been terrifying for someone who believed so much in the sanctity of life, like this girl did, to become numb to every such life she ended. Her words in the service hall yesterday came floating into his head. *All I want is out of the war*, she had said.

Suddenly, tormenting the girl no longer seemed quite so fun.

Author's note for real: In this chapter, we get to see the Koorivar Fusiliers and the Nemoidian Gunnery Battalion in operation. While the Nemoidian's guns look like muskets in the movie, I've decided to make them full auto rifles for drama's sake. Also Esera must suffer more. It's why two of my readers (you know who you are) seem to like her so much.

For those of you hoping I'll update faster after being stuck on this chapter for a while (parts of this were written last summer, parts were written an hour ago), you're slow learners. I am the flake of flakes, inconsistent of inconsistents. Your favorite pro-CIS AU Star Wars fanfic will be back in... June? I dunno, I've got no academic plans this summer, unlike last year. Just say "Ganbatte, Timewatch-san!" and pray for the best, I suppose!

Edit: fixed some typos and added the holonet forum name back that thought was spam (used · instead of a . this time).

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